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THE FUNCTIONS OF STATE AND LOCAL HISTORICAL
SOCIETIES WITH RESPECT TO RESEARCH
AND PUBLICATION.

BY

J. F. JAMESON, PH. D.,
PROFESSOR, BROWN UNIVERSITY.

(From the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1897, pages 51-59.)

WASHINGTON:
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Gift of Prof. J. T. Macdon

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The historical societies of the United States have many and interesting functions. They must collect and preserve historical material, printed and manuscript, and must maintain libraries and museums, well catalogued and accessible; they must print and publish; they must arouse public interest, and keep alive a patriotic regard for local history; they must take part in celebrations; they must accumulate biographical and obituary records; they must attract money and members. We all know that, considering their resources, they do most of these things exceedingly well. Each of us knows the serious efforts which his own society makes to accomplish these tasks; each of us is under frequent obligations to other societies for the fruits of their zealous and successful labors. The development of their libraries in particular can not fail to excite admiration. It may be said with confidence that there is no other country in the world in which the libraries of historical societies have so important a place as they have among the libraries of the United States.

But, if it is our practice with some regularity to examine the publications of these societies, must we not confess to a considerable degree of uneasiness and disappointment with respect to their performance of this particular function? The more certainly will this be our feeling if it is also our habit to keep an eye on the contemporary publications of the European historical societies. To make the comparison in absolute terms would be obviously unfair. The historical societies of a country like ours ought not to be expected to rival the published work of such organizations as the Société de l'Historie de France or the Scottish History Society. But even if we avoid the comparison with societies planted in cities so large as Paris

or so eminent for literary traditions as Edinburgh, there is still much to mortify and to incite us. The ordinary provincial historical journal of France or Germany is, we are obliged to confess, considerably superior to that of America in scholarship and in the amount of really important contribution to historical knowledge. Doubtless they have the advantage of being able to appeal to a larger body of cultivated and scholarly readers. But at least it will not be thought unfair to compare the present published work of our historical societies with that which they were doing forty years ago. Many of them are now printing a larger amount, some of them are printing work superior in quality, but most of them, it seems to me, are decidedly not showing that improvement in product which might justly be expected in view of the far more advanced state of historical knowledge in the country at large. We have also to remember the superior pecuniary resources of our societies, which form probably the richest body of such societies in the world. Upon a hasty estimate their buildings are certainly worth in the aggregate a million dollars, their libraries nearly or quite that, their endowments another million. So far as publications are concerned, the results are lamentably out of proportion to this gigantic investment.

May we not profitably inquire what have been the leading causes that have kept our societies from attaining that development we should have wished them to attain in respect to their functions of publication and research, and by what means their advancement in these respects might be promoted? It will probably be found that the suggestions here made are applicable rather to the historical societies of the older States, private endowed organizations having few or no statutory duties and public responsibilities, than to those State societies, closely connected with their State governments, upon whose functions Mr. Thwaites can discourse with so preeminent knowledge and authority. And certainly the suggestions are made with full knowledge of the fact that each society has its peculiar needs and duties, and that criticism and suggestion can be expressed only in general terms.

In the first place, should we not all agree that our older historical societies have often seemed to conceive of their respective fields and duties in too narrow, and even parochial, a sense? The reason for their existence is, of course, local history, and they win their public support, their money, and

their members by devoting themselves to local history. But there are some topics of local history which are purely local and nothing else, and there are those which, while no less important to the history of the locality, are also of significance with respect to the larger life of the nation. The historical society which devotes itself to the former when it might be doing something to elucidate the latter fails of the best part of its mission. Is a subject in the history of the locality more worthy of the society's time and money because nobody outside of the locality can by any possibility be expected to take an interest in it? On the contrary, it is just these subjects which deaden historical societies. If the State or the locality has any importance whatever which should make it worth while to have its history studied, it is because it has played some part in the life of the world. This is the thing to work at. *Hoc opus, hic labor.* Everyone knows that one of the leading defects of American historical writing has been that the writers knew too little of other history. So it is with local history. Neither men nor societies can hope to deal with it rightly unless their minds are full of American history at large and quick to see the relations of their tasks to that which explains them and gives them meaning. It is just this intelligent appreciation which gives to French local historical journals a large part of that superiority which has been remarked. Nor would the intellectual quickening which would come from such a transfer of attention, such consideration of the real importance of topics, be balanced by any material loss. The interest of local readers and subscribers would be held just as well or better. It should be remembered that things are not as they were fifty years ago. With increase of inter-communication purely local feeling has become less acute. The number of people who care a rush whether the Blue Boar Tavern stood in First street or in Second street, or who can excite themselves over silly questions of local priority in this or that small achievement, has grown considerably smaller and is constantly diminishing. Meanwhile the number of persons who have read a considerable amount of general American history or who take an intelligent interest in it, has greatly increased. It is to these people that societies must, in the long run, make their appeal for pecuniary and other support. It is highly probable that, by avoiding fussy antiquarianism and looking chiefly at the larger aspects of local history, they would accomplish the difficult feat of serving

both God and mammon. Not a few of our historical societies consist of two or three hundred sustaining members, who like to help in keeping up such an institution, and who are not without interest in American history, but who never attend the meetings, which have become the exclusive property of a few fossilized antiquarians. Would not fresh life be brought in if the society were to perceive clearly that its field of work is, rightly stated, *American history locally exemplified?*

Another class of persons who ought to be more actively interested in local historical societies is that of college teachers of history. This thought may properly be dwelt upon for a moment, for an insufficient degree of cooperation between the historical professors and the historical societies (a cooperation the promotion of which was at the beginning one of the prime objects of this association) is an evil of serious importance. Its importance cannot be rightly estimated unless we take into account the present stage of historical studies among us and the stage into which we are probably proceeding. Predictions are dangerous. But the intense conflicts of the Reformation brought forward in every country a generation of political historians, an age in which the minds of statesmen turned by a natural attraction toward history. Upon that age ensued, by a natural evolution, an age devoted chiefly to works of erudition, the publication of sources, the labors appropriate to academies and Benedictines. So the storm and stress of the French revolution generated a crop of political historians, the best part of the historical work coming from the hands of public men, like Mackintosh and Macaulay, Guizot and Thiers, Niebuhr and Bancroft and Herculano. There are not wanting signs in England and France, in Germany and America, that we are next proceeding, by a natural evolution, into a period characterized, I will not say by Benedictine achievements, but by extensive documentary publication and other academic labors. For the work of such a period the most appropriate agents in our country are the organized historical societies and the representatives of history in the universities. It would be a thousand pities if they should be allowed to drift apart. Yet they will inevitably do so if the societies are permitted to look upon their tasks of local history with purely local eyes; for the professor is daily occupied with the teaching of general American history. His mind is set on that. He can care little for local history that has not an infusion of that larger element.

It is a part of the same general suggestion if one goes on to say, in the second place, that our historical societies would add greatly to their usefulness if, in their published work and what they do in furtherance of research, they would pay more attention to the more recent periods of American history. Speaking of the older States only, it may almost be said that their historical societies pay twice as much attention to the period of exploration and first settlement as to all the rest of the seventeenth century, twice as much to the period anterior to 1700 as to that from 1700 to 1775, and none whatever to that since the Revolution. However great our passion for origines, can we defend this as rational? If the story of the past has a value because of its influence on the present, can we justify our neglect of that portion of the past which has been most directly influential, the more recent past? The field of colonial origins has been abundantly, almost superabundantly, cultivated. We could get along if for ten years no man printed another account of the early days of New England. Meanwhile how unsatisfactory is, for instance, our knowledge of the constitutions of the colonies in the half century preceding the Revolution, how complete our ignorance of State polities during the thirty years beginning in 1789? Fifty years ago it was perhaps reasonable to stop short with the Revolution. But the Revolution is now fifty years farther away, and surely in the hundred and twenty years since its time many interesting things have happened in the State and the locality as well as in the nation. Doubtless there are many persons to whose dim minds the phrase "American history" brings up instantly and solely the image of the Revolutionary war. Apparently most members of State legislatures belong to this class. But after all it is not to these that the society's publications are chiefly addressed. An historical society must not disdain popularity; but it shows a woful, and to my mind a quite unnecessary, want of courage if it avoids topics of real importance because they are not yet objects of popular interest, or permits popular fancies to divert it from what it really thinks to be its best work.

This inevitably leads one to say a word concerning genealogies. Rejice aniles fabulas, saith the Scripture—rejice genealogias. It is a ticklish business to take up one's parable against them in these days, when many an historical society is finding that by far the greater number of those who resort to its library come there for no other purpose than to hunt up their genealogies and to prove their right to entrance into the charmed

circle of the Sons of This or the Daughters of That. But nevertheless no historical society has a right to use its research and publication funds in furthering the purposes of these people, or, as one society does, to buy almost nothing but genealogies with its library fund. These funds were presumably given to the society for the furtherance of history. To use them for genealogical researches, for the publication or purchase of genealogies, is in almost all cases a gross misuse. The theory is of course that genealogy is an important aid to history. But is it, now and in this country? Volumes upon volumes of it have been printed. Search through the whole tiresome mass, and do you get a handful of historical wheat out of all this chaff, this pitiful accumulation of names and dates? But one answer is possible. The theory is, so far as this country is concerned, a mere superstition, one of Lord Bacon's *idola fori*. Geography is far more useful to history than genealogy; but what should we think of an historical society that bought nothing but atlases and printed nothing but maps? The addiction of historical societies to genealogies arises not from devotion to the primary and public purposes for which they were instituted, but from a weak desire to placate people who, it is thought, may in time, if sufficiently indulged, turn from their personal and private interest in their ancestry, and begin to take an interest in history. They may, but meantime is American history being rightly used?

To return to more positive suggestions, how neglected is the field of American economic history so far as our societies are concerned! If the world of European historical scholarship is turning more and more to the consideration of that subject, how much more ought this to be the case in a country like ours, a new country, a country in which constitutional and political development, the traditional subjects of historical study, have been at every step conditioned, directed, and controlled by economic factors and the course of economic evolution. But how little has been done in this direction aside from the history of the Federal finances! Here again the course which, on intellectual grounds, is so warmly to be advocated would almost certainly be profitable in a mundane sense, for there is nothing more certain to interest the business man, that arbiter of all American destinies, than the history of American business.

But in all these lines of publishing activity, which recommend

themselves to our minds as we survey the field, surely we shall all agree that what is most necessary is not the printing of essays and articles, but the printing of documents and materials. Documentary publication is the work which counts in the long run, the work which gives permanent value to the society's volumes. Look over the volumes published by the societies a generation ago. Nearly all the articles and essays are obsolete or antiquated. Such of them as were ever worth doing will have to be done over again. But the original documents then printed are still valid, still useful. The real glory of an historical society is a series of volumes of important historical documents, original materials selected with intelligence, systematically ordered, edited ably, and with finished scholarship.

All these counsels are in the last analysis counsels of energy and courage. Energy can not always be commanded; the work of societies must be done by the members it possesses, and fortunate are those who possess a group of active and resourceful members; doubly fortunate if their organization is such as to give the control to these rather than to those who are oldest, or to those who are richest, or to those eminent for something else quite alien to the business of history. But the counsel of courage is for all. Placed in the midst of material influences, our historical societies are charged with immaterial, one may even say spiritual, interests. They must be in and of the world. But they are wanting in insight and in that faith in American humanity which the study of American history should create if they do not believe it safe for them to cherish high and even austere ideals of scholarly endeavor; and they are recreant to their high trust if, having formed such ideals, they fail to pursue them in all the great work that lies before them, confident that before long their communities will appreciate and sustain their efforts. Like all of us in this complex and vulgar world, they must make compromises and adjust themselves with outward cheerfulness to the actual conditions of their life; but at least let them economize their concessions, and keep alive an inward regret and dissatisfaction over every sacrifice of their true ideals.



